

THE GREAT YELLOWSTONE CAMPFIRE MYSTERY



One hundred and twenty years ago, on March 1, 1872, Yellowstone became the first national park, a two-million-acre tract of wilderness preserved for the public's benefit and enjoyment. In the Gilded Age of rampant exploitation of public lands, how did such a radically different land-use concept suddenly gain government sanction? Who conceived the idea? Was it a purely altruistic notion—or were there other motives?

According to tradition, the national park concept originated during a discussion around a campfire near the "Madison Junction," where the Firehole and Gibbon rivers join to form the Madison River in present-day Yellowstone NP. Concluding their exploration of Yellowstone, members of the 1870 Washburn-Doane Expedition had built their campfire on the evening of September 19. While recalling the spectacular sights they had seen, the explorers rejected the idea of private exploitation of the area, agreeing instead that Yellowstone's wonderful geysers, canyons, and waterfalls should be preserved as a public park. Within a year and a half, Congress established Yellowstone NP. Even though the Yosemite Valley had been created as a California state park from federally donated lands in 1864, and the term "national park" had been mentioned in passing a few times, the belief that the national park idea had truly begun around a campfire at the Madison Junction became a cherished tradition.

But in 1971, as the centennial of Yellowstone approached, newly uncovered historical documentation cast a shadow on the altruism and romance of the campfire story. The new evidence indicated that the national park idea had been fostered by the Northern Pacific Railroad Company's corporate management—more a matter of profits than altruism. In the early 1870s, the Northern Pacific planned to extend its tracks from the Dakota Territory across Montana Territory; and with easiest access to

Yellowstone being from Montana, the company realized it could monopolize tourist traffic into the area. Alert to the economic potential, Northern Pacific financier Jay Cooke wanted to perpetuate federal ownership of the Yellowstone country. He wrote to a company official that a government "reservation" (or park) would prevent "squatters & claimants" from gaining control of the area's most scenic features. In developing Yellowstone as a tourist destination, the railroad could deal better with the government than with numerous small-time entrepreneurs.

There was indeed only slim evidence that the campfire discussion had actually occurred. The principal account appeared in the diary of Nathaniel P. Langford, a member of the 1870 expedition. However, Langford's original record of the expedition, taken from his field notes, did not even mention the conversation—nor was it mentioned in any of the known diaries or notes written by other participants. Not until thirty-five years later, when he compiled a diary and published it in 1905, did Langford produce his account of the campfire discussion, including an unusual amount of detail given the time elapsed. About the time Langford's new account appeared, another expedition member added to his diary a brief reference to the campfire meeting—a curious rush to amend the record.

Moreover, Langford had met with Jay Cooke in Philadelphia in June 1870, i.e., *before* proceeding to Montana, where, with Northern Pacific backing, he successfully promoted the expedition, which began in August. With continued support from the railroad company, Langford followed up the expedition with lectures to audiences in Montana and in East Coast cities, extolling the wonders he had seen in the Yellowstone region. The Northern Pacific then subsidized artist Thomas Moran's participation in the Hayden Expedition into Yellowstone during the summer

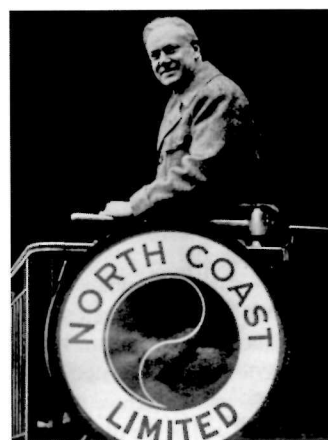
of 1871. Moran's sketches from this trip were displayed in the Capitol in Washington as part of the effort to promote the Yellowstone legislation.

Following the Hayden Expedition, the Northern Pacific (realizing the need, as Cooke stated, to "do something speedily") lobbied for the park with swift success: the Yellowstone bill was introduced on December 18, 1871, and enacted the following March. Thus the Northern Pacific had imposed continuous influence on the Yellowstone park movement—beginning even before the 1870 expedition that produced the campfire tradition.

The campfire story had been challenged—the explorers seemed about to be replaced by railroad tycoons. But there was much more involved than just a story; at stake was the creation myth of the national parks—that from a gathering of explorers on a late summer evening in the northern Rocky Mountains had come the inspiration for Yellowstone NP, the prototype for hundreds of similar parks and reserves around the world. The Madison Junction seemed a fitting and proper place for the birth of the national park idea. Truly the creation myth seemed deserving of a virgin birth—under a night sky in the American West, along a river bank, and around a campfire—as if an evergreen cone had fallen near the fire, then heated and expanded, and dropped its seeds to spread around the world.

Thus to the National Park Service in 1971, this challenge to the campfire tradition was a serious concern, one made especially urgent since the following year the Park Service was to commemorate Yellowstone's centennial by hosting the Second World Conference on National Parks. The conference was to be held in Yellowstone, scene of the famed campfire discussion—but had the discussion actually happened, and even if it had, did it merely reflect the Northern Pacific's plans for the area?

The Park Service reacted swiftly, setting up a top-level committee to examine the historical evidence and determine the story's authenticity. Yet the committee's conclusion was perhaps



Stephen T. Mather, first director of the National Park Service, was instrumental in furthering the "pragmatic alliance" reached between the Western railroads and national park devotees. Photo courtesy of the National Archives.

best characterized by a former Yellowstone superintendent who spoke for the "tradition and inspiration" of the campfire story. He argued that if it had never actually happened the

Service would have been "well advised to invent it." It is a "perfect image," he stated, "let's use it!" Not surprisingly, the campfire tradition weathered the storm. Indeed, even though it lacks strong historical evidence the story cannot be fully disproved. Today, it remains suspended somewhere between myth and fact.

Still, it seems clear that without the Northern Pacific's active involvement the legislation would never have succeeded. But whether the national park idea sprang from a campfire discussion or a corporate boardroom meeting, both versions reflected a common concern—to preserve Yellowstone's scenery and to prevent private land claims from closing the area to the general public. With or without a campfire, the real significance of Yellowstone lay in the collaboration between private business and the federal government to foster a new kind of public land use in the West.

This latest contribution from Southwest Regional Office historian Dick Sellars was published in the Outlook section of the Washington Post on February 23.

Symposium Follow-up —An Update and Timetable

- The Steering Committee's final report is out. It represents the Committee's efforts to synthesize and prioritize the recommendations of the four Symposium working groups convened to discuss and make recommendations in the areas of organizational renewal, resource stewardship, park use and enjoyment, and environmental leadership. Included as supporting materials to the Steering Committee's report are the reports of the working groups.

- NPS senior management and Team Implement leaders plan to review the report and respond with their comments to Deputy Director Herb Cables by mid-April. These responses will be evaluated by the members of the nucleus group responsible for organizing Symposium actions (Dick Marks, Loran Fraser, Nancy Nelson, Maria Burks, Kate Stevenson, John Debo, and Stan Ponce) by early May. The "Top Ten" issues then will be identified as well as the support needed to carry them out. As currently scheduled, this list of priority issues will be reviewed and ratified by senior management, then announced by Deputy Director Cables by mid-May.

- Phase II of the Symposium follow-up is slated to begin in June, when Team Implement members get together to identify the tasks needed to initiate change. Once Deputy Director Cables approves these tasks they will be assigned to various units throughout the Service. In addition, special task forces will be created for the purpose of carrying out and implementing identified changes. Consultants also may be brought into the process.

- Already various efforts connected with the Symposium follow-up are ongoing, some of them formally recognized, others of a less formal nature. The "Lead by Examples" task force met at the end of February to identify ways in which the Service can model and promote environmentally sensitive management. A proposal for a mandatory Servicewide orientation program has been developed, and work is proceeding on proposals for the Service to better inform employees about non-park programs. The American Heritage Area concept paper also has been distributed for review.